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SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE

Sister cities relationships remain priority for Miami-Dade

By Marilyn Bowden

Several jurisdictions in Miami-Dade County encourage trade and cultural exchanges with municipalities in Spain through Sister Cities International.

Founded during the Eisenhower Administration, the nonprofit Sister Cities International aims to "build global cooperation at the municipal level, promote cultural understanding and stimulate economic development," according to its web site.

Miami-Dade has been involved in a Sister-City relationship with Tenerife in the Canary Islands since 1992, said Tony Ojeda, executive director of The Jay Malina International Trade Consortium, a county agency that acts as a clearinghouse for trade development efforts within Miami-Dade.

He said there were many reasons for partnering with a city in the Canary Islands — cultural as well as economic.

"Large numbers of Cuban-Americans and other Hispanics are descendants of

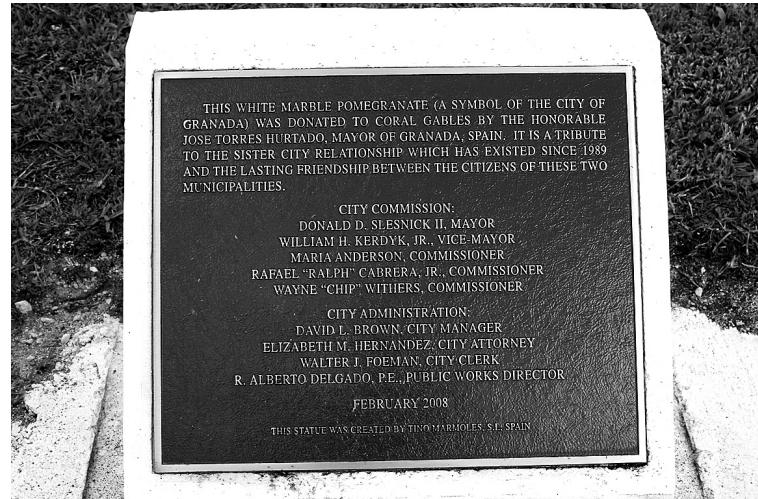


Photo by Marlene Quaroni

A plaque dedicates the white marble pomegranite, a gift from Granada.

Canarians, so there are ties that transcend just government-to-government transactions."

Over the years, Mr. Ojeda said, a number of missions have gone back and forth.

"In 2002," he said, "Tenerife hosted the Fifth Hemispheric Sister City Forum, a meeting of all the Sister Cities in the Western Hemisphere."

Miami-Dade business leaders visited on trade missions in 2005 and 2008, he said. One tangible result of the

2008 mission, headed by county Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, was establishment of a direct flight via Air Europa between Miami and Tenerife — an accomplishment many years in the making.

"We built a monument to Tenerife at Crandon Park," Mr. Ojeda said, "and they have one for us in a beautiful park at the point on the island closest to Miami-Dade."

Coral Gables has had an active sister city relationship with the city of Granada since 1989, said Mayor Don



The 10-foot statue is a tribute to the 20-year sister city relationship.

Slesnick. The program is run by volunteers based in the City Manager's Office.

"I'm proud to say that during my term of office, in spite of budgetary constraints, we make our Sister Cities Program a priority," he said.

"Our hope is to build relationships similar to the old People to People programs to increase understanding of foreign cultures and encourage world peace. I've personally visited five of our six sister cities, including Granada."

Several years ago, the mayor said, he led a delegation of about 25 people on an official visitation.

"We met with representatives of the city government, the chamber of commerce and various cultural and business institutions," he said. "They entertained us extremely well."

"It was like a state visit to a president – we exchanged gifts, made business contacts and opened doors for cultural exchanges for artists."

The delegation took the opportunity to visit near-by Almeria as well, Mr. Slesnick said, where they visited the mayor, signed a letter of cooperation for tourism and started a pen-pal program for school children in Coral

Gables.

"A short time later, the Mayor of Granada came here to Coral Gables with about 20 people," he said, "and it was the same thing – we treated them like royalty and made sure they met everyone in town and were entertained and fed well."

Granada's mayor was so inspired by these back-to-back visits, Mr. Slesnick said, that he sent the City of Coral Gables a 10-foot marble pomegranate with a Spanish crown on top, which is the symbol of his city.

"It's quite an impressive piece," he said. "We made a special place for it in Granada Park on Granada Boulevard, just north of US 1, and we've been working on having the mayor back to

dedicate it."

Several years ago, Mr. Slesnick said, Coral Gables was recognized by Sister Cities International for having the best program for a city of its size.

Almonte, a seaside resort in the province of Andalucia, is sister city to the City of Miami Beach, said George Neary, new chair of its Sister Cities Program. The program is administered through the Mayor's International Council.

"The sister cities program can be a wonderful way for cities to continue to learn more about each other," Mr. Neary said. "We are in the process of reorganization and getting all our documentation right."



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Don Slesnick



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